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ABSTRACT

Children's friendships are currently understood from a psychological perspective that focuses on the child's internal concept of friendship and how it develops. Very few scholars have directly examined how children's talk in the relationship influences the friendship or the perceptions children have of the friendship. A communicative perspective of children's friendships focuses on the communicative experience that informs cognitive transformations. The assumptions of an interactive focus include: (1) children talk friendships into existence; (2) children co-create friendship rules; and (3) children internalize friendship interactions to gradually form a model of friendship which then further structures interaction. Data to test such assumptions must come from naturally occurring friendships rather than limited choice school interactions, and must include observations of the friends talking as well as interviews of each friend about the talk. Quantitative analysis of coded interview responses may reveal characteristics of different types of friendships as well as the reciprocity of responses within friendships. Qualitative analysis of conversation transcripts may reveal patterns of talk describing relational rules and allow more global assessments of emerging dialectical tensions. A communication perspective of friendship demands time-consuming and labor-intensive research elements of design, data, and analysis. But such elements are more likely to lead to adequate descriptions of how peer relationships are formed and transformed over time by talk. (Forty-one references are attached.) (SR)

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CHILDREN'S TALK AS CONSTITUTIVE OF FRIENDSHIPS

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CHILDREN'S TALK AS CONSTITUTIVE OF FRIENDSHIPS

Introduction

Children's friendships have been the subject of scholarly scrutiny for several decades. Even so, very few have directly examined how children's talk in the relationship influences the friendship or the perceptions children have of the friendship. The notable exceptions (Corsaro, 1985; Rizzo, 1989) employ direct observations of young children talking their friendships, but examine content rather than interactive strategies. I suggest that talk in friendships constitutes the relationship process; that children talk their friendships into existence, co-create friendship rules in the process, and gradually internalize friendship interactions to form an increasingly sophisticated model of friendship which then further structures friendship talk. In this work, I will describe briefly the extant theoretical literature on children's friendships and argue the theoretical proposition presented above.

Psychological Perspectives

The research on children's friendships emerges almost entirely from the psychological perspective--friendship as an individual conception grounded in individual traits and bounded by cognitive development. A brief review of these "person-centered" theories will be followed by a look at the "interactionist" perspective (Morrison, 1983), and finally an examination of the explanatory constructs for children's concepts of friendship that have emerged from those traditions.

Person-Centered Theories

Bigelow and LaGaipa (1980) described three theoretical camps regarding children's social development: behavioral, stage-constrained structural, and stage-free structural. Enjoying less influence than it once did, the behavioral perspective assumes social behavior to be a consequent of reinforcement. The stage-constrained structural approach, exemplified by Piaget's stages of cognitive development, has been used to describe psychological development (Bigelow, 1977; Kohlberg, 1969). Although it often has failed the test of usefulness in predicting development, it is still used to categorize children's concepts like illness (Bibace & Walsh, 1978; 1980; Eiser, 1985). The stage-free structural theory was first articulated by Werner (1957) as orthogenetic theory. Generally, development is assumed to proceed from global to more differentiated skills and concepts. For example, children shift from concrete to more abstract expression. In like manner, their concepts about friendship also change qualitatively but not necessarily within stage-like boundaries (Brainerd, 1973).

Interactionist Theories

In contrast to the search for universal psychological process, interactionists examine specific, contextual interaction

processes for cues to the underlying psychological structure (Vygotsky, 1962; 1978). The unit of analysis, of course, must change from the individual to dyadic interaction (Morrison, 1983). Although they acknowledge more variability in human development, still the focus is on individual psychology--individuals will "possess patterns of strengths and weaknesses in cognitive, affective and behavioral domains" (Morrison, p.103).

Youniss (1978; 1980), assuming that children's friendships are constituted interpersonally, studied children's accounts of friendships for general themes and found that context does matter. He found that child-child and child-adult relations are not simply different, but lead to two types of understanding. Peer relations are co-constructed and lead to mutuality; adult-child relations are unilaterally authoritative and lead to self-constructions that take into account societal expectations for interaction (1978). Youniss' theoretical framework emerged from the work of Piaget and Sullivan, both of whom agree that children's interactions play an important function in social life, but do not view communication processes as primary. Rather, cognitive processes are the starting point of development and communicative processes arise to serve cognition. Certainly, Youniss' view is more sophisticated than that. He does state that children construct thought on the basis of interaction, largely by adapting to the demands of those interactions in cooperation (Youniss & Volpe, 1978, pp.4-5).

Finally, Corsaro (1985) and Rizzo (1989) have performed qualitative analyses of children's friendships. Their data involved observations of young children in everyday activities; both describe talk and other factors affecting the interactions as well as the social-ecological conditions in which they occur. They extend the Sullivan/Piaget perspective used by Youniss to include the social constructivism of the Soviet psychologists (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). In this view, intrapersonal knowledge originates in interpersonal phenomena; thus the child must have experience of friendship and internalize that experience to develop a model of what friendship is. Talk per se is critical to the development of concepts such as friendship.

Both Vygotsky and Piaget could be considered interactionists, or dialecticians; that is, they focused on development as the study of interrelationship and change (Bidell, 1988). However, Vygotsky claimed that the child uses speech to alter the power of thought. Specifically, he countered Piaget's claim that egocentric speech is nonfunctional with the claim that it serves to regulate the child's own behavior, and further, that when we no longer hear egocentric speech it is because it has been internalized by the child to form a new kind of thought constructed by speech (Vygotsky, 1962, p.46).

If we take the Piagetian view that cognition proceeds in developmental stages and speech reflects those developments, then we would interpret children's self-reports of friendships based on proximity, common activities, and propinquity (Bigelow, 1977; Selman, 1981) as appropriate to their stage. If, on the other

hand, we assume with Vygotsky that the child is constructing concepts of friendship on the basis of spoken interaction, we might expect a lag between a demonstrated ability to act according to a principle (like friendship) and the ability to consciously reflect on that principle. In fact, Rizzo & Corsaro (1988) found just such a lag, as have researchers examining interactive learning of scientific rather than social concepts (Forman & Cazden, 1985). Thus we must begin to examine both naturally occuring interactions and what children say about them.

Explanatory Constructs for Children's Friendships

Children's conceptions of friendship may be expected to vary for a number of reasons including: adult socialization practices, field of potential friends, and the capacity of the child to structure and use experience. Given that degree of socialization varies, we might now look for explanations for the kinds of choices that are most likely when children form a model of friendship. Explanatory constructs have included equilibration (Bigelow & LaGaipa, 1980), social perspective-taking (Selman, 1976), reciprocity (Mannarino, 1980; Youniss, 1978) and self-validation (Duck, Miell & Gaebler, 1980).

Equilibration is an Piagetian explanation of development as a result of the internal disequilibrium experienced by exposure to another's concepts--usually more sophisticated than one's own. Resolving this disequilibrium involves a preference for the next higher step in friendship knowledge (Bigelow & LaGaipa, 1980, p.26)--that is, choosing friends who can help you learn about friendship. The concept of disequilibrium rests on the assumption of cognitive conflict--we must disagree in order to change (Forman & Cazden, 1985, p.340). However, some peer interactions are supportive, mutual and still of intellectual value. Vygotsky acknowledged a type of cognitive reorganization based on his notion of the "zone of proximal development." He claimed that a discrepancy may exist between solitary and social problem-solving; this zone is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978, p.86). Thus, the change in a child's concept of friendship that may follow contact with a new friend does not necessarily involve overt conflict but rather the internalization of new social interaction processes.

When a child begins to internalize social expectations, or cognitively reorganize schema for effective behavior in light of another's expectations, that child begins to decenter. In the field of communication, perspective-taking, a type of decentering, is assumed to be critical to effective communication of all sorts (Clark & Delia, 1977; Delia, Kline & Burleson, 1979). Several researchers, however, have found no relationship between role-taking ability--ability to understand the point of view of the other in relation to that of self--and peer success

(Bartholomew, 1979 and Lehr, 1978 both cited in LaGaipa, 1981; Selman, 1976).

The notion of reciprocity rests upon the assumption that we construct rules for handling differences of opinion. Relations between equals are founded on reciprocal procedures which lead to mutuality (Youniss, 1978, p.6). His examples are not literal reciprocal behaviors in the sense of tit-for-tat--endless series of retaliations or kindnesses--but activities that acknowledge the general principle of mutuality (i.e., "Somebody that you like and he likes you." "A person who helps you do things. When you need something, they get it. You do the same for them.") (1980, p.127). Negotiating rules that coordinate the friendship is a function of this reciprocity.

A functioning self-concept and the ability to compare self with other lead us to seek self-validation from others. Duck, Miell and Gaebler (1980) suggest that children form relationships in a manner parallel to adult relationship development. Adults look for support for self, thus are attracted to those similar in personal constructs. Duck (1975) found some support among adolescent subjects; partner similarity was higher among friends and increased with age.

Explanations for children's conceptions of friendship have been largely limited to psychological constructs, none of which have yet received resounding support. The closest to a true interaction construct is reciprocity, however the assumptions and methodologies guiding prior research have not produced the kind of data needed to examine the interactive factors (communicative strategies as well as content) that could effect reciprocity, or for that matter, self-validation, perspective-taking or equilibration.[1] Indeed, if we find "cognitive restructuring" a more sympathetic construct than equilibration, then several kinds of talk would have to be compared. If the child's concept of friendship is restructured on the basis of friendship talk, then talk in the friendship should be a foreshadowing of later talk about friendship. And this restructuring based on a friend's expectations should lead to an increased capacity for perspective-taking; that is current decentering may not be related to peer success. But the restructuring that might occur on the basis of one friendship could foster the necessary decentering for more successful interactions in the future.

A Communication Perspective

What sorts of interaction would reveal how these constructs work--or do not? I suggest that observations of friendship pairs in interaction, along with some structured talk about that interaction, will reveal much about how children enact friendship and how that enactment affects their social knowledge.

Children's Talk: Transformation, Experience and Dialectics

Children do think and talk differently than adults; however they nevertheless have the abilities to make choices about

friendships, form perceptions individually, and adapt their communication behavior to various types of friendships. Although simple maturation certainly contributes to their development, we can no longer rely on cognitive stages to explain differences among social relationships, or even to explain what appear to be age differences. Children may be limited in their conceptual reach, but social experience appears to contribute more to variance than was once suspected, and certainly more than has been accounted for.

Transformation. How does interaction inform social knowledge? Vygotsky claims that we internalize interactive experience; that "every function in the child's development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (1978, p.57).

Rizzo & Corsaro (1988) found that the interactions among friends in nursery school reflected more sophisticated behaviors than were expected from prior research; children displayed sharing, helping, ego reinforcement (validation), loyalty, similarity and intimacy. However, their internalized concept of friendship was somewhat idealized--when a partner failed expectations, friends were likely to engage in disputes but most often expected their partner to change. That is, they impose their current concept on interactions and attempt to resolve the dispute interpersonally, then perhaps intrapersonally; a gradual process of cyclical, short-term transformations may describe this process (p.233).

Experience and gender differences. How do these transformations affect the developing models of friendship? One way to examine variations in emerging expectations for interaction is to look at the differences between girls and boys --all other factors being more or less equal. Children do not develop one generalized model of friendship; males and females not only interact differently from very early in life, they begin to develop different expectations for what friendship should be. Past research confirms very early differences--girls prefer cooperative games over boys' competitive games (Lever, 1976; 1978), both sexes prefer same-sex playmates by the age of four (Rubin, 1980), and by the fourth grade, girls score higher on friendship motivation (McAdams & Losoff, 1984). These early preferences may be based on the notion of reciprocity; it is easier to negotiate appropriate rules with someone who has similar preferences for, say cooperation vs. competition.

This author (1990) recently reported results of case studies in which six-year old boys claimed to initiate conversations and topics (regardless of whether they in fact did so) while the girls either claimed ignorance or attributed initiations to their partner. In addition, girls felt reciprocally understood while the boys did not; the boys however use interruptions and verbal reinforcement nonreciprocally, so their perceptions are sensible.

Dialectics of friendship. One way to conceptualize the forces that shape interaction processes is in terms of

dialectics. Rawlins (1991) suggests that the "different moments and modes of friendship shape and reflect various configurations of its dialectical features as a situated interpersonal activity" (pp.21-22). However, the dialectics may begin to emerge at different points in development. In very early childhood, children do not comprehend that relationships persist despite separation, so the conflict between independence and dependence is not a critical concern until being apart is an issue. Similarly, the distinction between affection and instrumentality as bases for friendship is minimal early in life--the other's belongings and/or attributes can ground a friendship choice. The child must also be able to think abstractly to develop and employ standards for judgement, so the dialectic of judgement and acceptance is also likely to be a later concern.

However, the interplay between expressiveness and protectiveness may begin earlier; young children are notoriously blunt but begin to recognize that some statements incite unfavorable reactions in their friends and slowly they learn to protect them to some extent (Rawlins, 1991). Of course, we must assume that a child who can socialize their interaction this way--can take the other's perspective--must have internalized spoken expectations to some extent in order to decenter. They have reorganized the external expectations for friendship on the basis of experience.

The dialectics vary in terms of when they begin to be taken into account by young friends. Some clues may rest in those early male-female differences. Rawlins reports adult differences between males and females in the value we hold for one end or the other of the dialectics. Generally in friendships, males value independence and females dependence; females make choices based on affection and males on instrumentality; females tend to judge while males accept; and females are expressive while males are protective (Rawlins, 1988, pp.178-180). What sorts of early interaction experiences lead us to internalize such varied models of friendship? And how can we observe the formation of the model?

A Focus on Interaction

The units and constructs of a communication theory about children's friendships are defined and operationalized differently than the units of a psychological theory. The first and most obvious difference is in the unit of analysis. Although scholars have recognized the importance of examining the dyad rather than the individual, in fact very few have looked beyond the individual response to a relational event. To access the relationship, we must have data not only from both participants of the friendship, but from both participants about the friendship, and everyday talk from both in the friendship. Methods for gathering these data are suggested in the next section. For now, let us assume we have such data and must limit our view of that data.

What do we look for? To test the assumption that talk constitutes and structures friendships, we will want to examine

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the data for rules or evolving patterns of relating. Let us take each proposition of the theory in turn.

1. Children talk friendships into existence. This proposition begs for longitudinal analysis. Of course, the problems associated with longitudinal studies are daunting to the ambitious scholar which is why there are so few examples of them. Another option is the cohort design which allows the researcher to examine comparable child pairs at different stages in their respective friendships. The term "comparable" is the problem here, especially with qualitative analysis that admits of individual variation. These issues are discussed below. In any case, we would want to compare rules of conversation as well as of friendship for differences in kind or degree. What constitutes a rule?

2. Children co-create friendship rules. The rules of a relationship may be either implicit or explicit but may be observed in natural conversation. Explicit rules may emerge in the relationship talk--demands, negations, formulations of the interaction (revealing speaker's assumptions). Conflict episodes are particularly revealing; Rizzo found that children "work out the terms of their relationship" (1989, p.98) in dispute episodes requiring negotiation. These data are obviously found in friendship talk and I suggest that the patterns reveal themselves in discourse analysis (see Analysis below).

In addition, interview responses may reveal rule failures. The child who is asked "did your partner understand what you were saying?" or "did this talk change how you think about anything?" may well respond with specific complaints if their expectations were not met. Referencing the actual talk will then give specifics about the failure. One interview agenda (ICR) that includes these questions is discussed below.

3. Children internalize friendship interactions to gradually form a model of friendship which then structures further interaction. The final proposition also appears particularly suited to longitudinal data, but may be otherwise tested. Although young children rarely seem to metacommunicate despite their ability to do so (Gottman & Parker, 1986), my observations reveal some metacommunication among friends. Children can index prior talk and relational events and thus call attention to present problems (e.g. "You're being mean" or "cause I'm MAd that you wouldent LET me.") Indexical statements may help to reveal the expectations children have formed for friendship.

Interview data may explicitly ask questions about how the interaction changes. The responses to "did this talk change how you will act?" "did this talk change the way you feel?" and "do you like your partner more now?" can begin to give a picture of how the talk changes the relationship. Not surprisingly, the most fruitful data follows interaction involving a dispute.

Analyzing everyday friendship talk for communicative strategies (e.g., demands, negations) as well as content (e.g., disputes, indexing prior talk) in addition to examining interview responses to explicit questions about the talk are likely to

provide the requisite data for testing an interactive approach to friendship. Specific outcomes are expected to include conversational patterns common to various types of friendships and emergent rules created by partners; broader outcomes may include general features of friendship types (e.g., dialectical principles preferred by boys or girls, or principles common to particular phases of friendship development). Now we move to methodological particulars.

Methodological Issues.

Design. Designs for sampling subjects in development are varied--each have their problems and advantages (Porges, 1979) Most commonly employed is the cross-sectional or cohort design, because the researcher can collect data at one point in time and complete the study before retirement age. The problem with gathering data from subjects in different age groups at one time point for comparison is that the samples may not be comparable. What is true of one age group may not be true of the other. Or the effect of the measurement may vary. Studying children is not like studying rats--one is not like every other. The genetic material and environmental surround vary a great deal. Again, we must be wary of looking for 'generalizable' results only.

Longitudinal designs appear ideal for our purposes, but they bring very different problems. Some measurements may raise the concern of practice effects over time (observation avoids the measurement problem to some extent). Time of testing or observation may also have an effect independent of age or development. The most severe and unavoidable problems are the ones that plague the researcher--attrition, lack of flexibility to refine procedures over time, and the demands of time that ignore the tenure clock (Griffin & Sparks, 1990).

Several sequential data collection strategies have been suggested for eliminating the above disadvantages. Bell (1953) proposed alternate sampling to assess differences across sets of cohorts matched on chronological age. Schaie and Baltes (1975) proposed a developmental model including three designs, each of which varies two factors of three he believes critical to performance: chronological age, birth cohort, and time of measurement. Such designs require successions of studies, still requiring more time and effort than many researchers are willing to devote.

At this point, we have very little observed interaction to guide our descriptions of communication development. This, I believe, is where we must start, using a variety of designs before we proceed to experimental methods or the use of measures developed with adult samples. The constructs we assume to characterize friendship behavior among college students may not be useful to describe younger friends.

Participants. Much of the research performed to date involved participants who were school chums. Although these data may give us valuable information about the educational setting and about peer relationships in general, it may not be the best

source of data for analyzing friendships. One well accepted assumption about young friends is that the pairing is more serendipitous than voluntary--that your friend is the person who is close at hand. That assumption has been reinforced by using participants from nursery schools and grammar schools. Naturally, one's choices are limited in the school setting, but most children have "school friends" and "friends." Asking parents and other adults significant to the children to aid in data collection may give us the children's "chosen friend." I have found that asking students in a communication development class to obtain data (as part of an assignment) gives me a much richer data pool, although certainly less controlled. What I sacrifice in control (of standardized procedures for example) I gain in richness. Many of my friend pairs have known each other all their lives and show a value for these "best friends" that we probably would not find among school chums.

Observation method. Using adults known to the children to collect tapes of conversations and conduct interviews is risky. Observer bias is inherent when a familiar is the observer. Threats to validity are reduced by simply having the adult set the tape recorder and leave the room. The interviews, however, pose a threat to reliability. Although procedures are set forth in writing and discussed orally with each adult, there remains plenty of room for error.[2] Most of the interview schedules were returned completed and without additional notes on procedural problems, however a few were incomplete and problems were reported, especially with younger children who cannot sustain the necessary attention to the questions.

Coding. Assuming that we now have transcriptions of children's talk in friendships and responses to interview questions, the next step is coding; the two data sets present different challenges.

Although many of the interview questions are open-ended, still it is a matter often of simply coding yes or no, or a degree. In other cases, the issue is how to categorize a response, but all the participants are responding to the same questions thus classifications emerge from examining a number of responses to the same question. Now, if we wish to capture the dyadic nature of the relationship--that is, we want to know how their answers compare or complement each other--we must look at pairs of responses. The degree to which perceptions are shared may give us clues to the reciprocity in a relationship, as well as similarity between friends. For example, agreement that the partner is his/her "best friend" gives us a way to label the relationship from the participants' perspective; disagreement on "who decided what you would talk about?" gives us information about the importance of the independence/dependence dialectic (boys tend to disagree and say "me;" girls also disagree but to give their partner credit or claim no recall of it).

Transcripts allow a wider range of coding possibilities. Most researchers who have worked from transcripts of children's friendship talk have stayed with fairly global assessments of the

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interaction which raises several questions: 1) how do we avoid imposing either the researcher's expectations or an adult interpretive bias on the talk? and 2) how do we find communicative rules in the talk without looking at more specific skills and strategies? The two appear to be related. If we look at the talk globally and from an adult perspective, we will make many assumptions about the talk that may not be warranted (e.g. a partner's use of sarcasm in conflict when that is a skill we cannot reasonably expect from a six-year-old). On the other hand, if we use microanalysis, that is code for specific conversational behaviors that may described rather than inferred, we make no such leaps of interpretation unless we have the behavioral description and no reasonable alternatives. Then the more global assessments may be made in order to get at the interesting questions of dialectical tensions and so forth.

Analysis. Discourse analysis provides us a way to code the talk with a priori categories (e.g., interruptions, overlaps, affirmation, negation), leaving the more global categories such as rules and dialectics to emerge from the conversation patterns. Although we can locate only observable behaviors in talk, we can indirectly access their functions from what is accomplished in interaction--deduce rules. We may assume that "ordinary discourse is itself an organized reflection of how interactants interpret, reason, make sense, monitor, and otherwise used their knowledge to structure everyday interactions." (Beach, 1983, p.197)

The qualitative coding may be followed by simple descriptive statistics to describe patterns which may then be categorized. With large data sets, we might consider more sophisticated inferential statistics such as factor analysis for questionnaire data, or sequential analysis for conversation data.

Projections. The current project now has 14 data sets; additions enter the pool frequently but not in great numbers. Adult students with children of their own, or who have friends with children, provide the tapes and interview responses. I expect that when treated as outlined above, the data will reveal more about the types of talk that constitute friendship.

Summary and Conclusions

Children's friendships are currently understood from a psychological perspective that focuses on the child's internal concept of friendship and how it develops. Most of that research has examined school chums' self-reports of friendship; the exceptions have observed young schoolchildren's interactions as well as self-reports. Although some scholars acknowledge that social experience must be internalized in order that the child build a model of friendship, none have examined the communicative processes that constitute that social experience.

A communicative perspective of children's friendships focuses on the communicative experience that informs cognitive transformations. The assumptions of an interactive focus include 1) Children talk friendships into existence, 2) children cocreate

friendship rules, and 3) children internalize friendship interactions to gradually form a model of friendship which then further structures interaction. Data to test such assumptions must come from naturally occuring friendships rather than limited choice school interactions, and must include observations of the friends talking as well as interviews of each friend about the talk. Quantitive analysis of coded interview responses may reveal characteristics of different types of friendships as well as the reciprocity of responses within friendships. Qualitative analysis of conversation transcripts may reveal patterns of talk describing relational rules and allow more global assessments of emerging dialectical tensions.

A communication perspective of friendship demands time-consuming and labor-intensive research elements of design, data and analysis. But such elements are more likely to lead us to adequate descriptions of how peer relationships are formed and transformed over time by talk.

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Notes

1. Rizzo (1989) does use appropriate methodology to examine interactive factors, but draws assumptions largely from the content of the children's talk. Thus, I believe, his conclusions are not as rich as they might have been if he had examined communicative strategies as well.

2. A training session was required of each adult observer. We discussed taping procedures--tape the children only in a fairly quiet setting, set up the recorder and let it run for fifteen to twenty minutes, and use the parent's recommendation regarding revealing the presence of the recorder. We the discussed the interview instrument, going over each item and raising probable problems and methods for conducting the interview. Instructions included: ask every question, note lack of response as well as exact verbal response, gain as much background information as possible, do not pressure the child to complete--rest and return, and plan an activity for one child to perform while the other is interviewed.